

SATISFACTION IN CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION RESEARCH: PROMISES AND PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

The consumer socialization process is discussed and a brief summary of a research effort using the concept of satisfaction in consumer socialization research is reported. This research employed behavioral measures of satisfaction. Finally, a theoretical justification of the behavioral measures is presented along with problems encountered with conducting satisfaction research with toddlers.

INTRODUCTION

Recently a body of research has begun to emerge within marketing, but transcending multiple disciplines, dealing with how consumers learn to select and evaluate information in the market place. Although the research might generally be categorized under the title of "consumer socialization", research in the area has primarily concentrated on the effects of advertising on children (Ward, 1972a; Ward, 1972b), children's purchase decision making (Robertson, 1974a; Ward, 1973) and children's influence on parental purchases (Robertson, 1974b; Ward, 1972c). The broad interest of researchers in this area is to understand the development of thinking behavior patterns. It is hoped that by understanding these early developmental patterns consumer education programs can be developed and public policy affected to influence latter patterns of consumer behavior. This is not a new goal, for the hypothesis that early childhood experiences are important influences on shaping future behavioral patterns has, for some time, been a basic tenet of the behavioral sciences. Although this research hypothesis is not new, the fact that researchers in the marketing discipline have joined the research effort provides another dimension to this research.

Ward (1974) has cited a number of reasons why research in the area of relating early childhood experiences to future consumer behavior may be fruitful. Some of these reasons include

- (1) the prediction of adult consumer behavior from childhood experiences
- (2) the formulation of more effective child-related public policy and consumer education programs
- (3) the development of more affective and efficient marketing strategy
- (4) the synthesis of consumer socialization research in the area of consumer behavior, inter-generational consistency and change and the impact of social trends on buying behavior
- (5) the extension of theory regarding the development and socialization of consumers.

In a recent paper (Bjorklund, 1978) we combined the concept of consumer satisfaction with the cognitive development and information processing notions used in the consumer socialization research. The purpose of that exploratory research was to investigate children's satisfaction with their play environments, where play environments were defined in terms of the quantity and quality of toys. It was hoped the research would provide the impetus for other researchers to undertake similar but more extensive studies so that definitive statements could be made to affect (1) consumer education programs; (2) public policy and (3) toy manufacturers labeling of toys for different age groups. In

that study we employed behavioral measures of satisfaction. These behavioral measures were necessary since our subjects, toddlers from age twelve months to twenty months, could not respond to traditional tasks required to measure satisfaction.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to report on the (1) theoretical justification of our behavioral measures and (2) problems encountered in conducting research on toddlers' satisfaction with their toy environments.

PAST RESEARCH

Satisfaction

During the last three years the concept of satisfaction has received increased attention from persons within and outside the marketing area. A key area of concentration in recent research has been alternative approaches to conceptualizing and measuring satisfaction. Day (1977) has identified two major approaches: the utility approach and the approach based on prior expectation. Both approaches use scales which are not directly applicable to the study of satisfaction among young children. For example, the immaturity of the toddlers used in our previous study prohibited the use of prior expectations since subjects had little or no experience upon which to base their expectations. In addition both the expectancy and utility approaches have utilized verbal or written responses. Since our subjects were unskilled in both verbal and written responses a new approach had to be developed to study toddler satisfaction.

One alternative was the use of behavioral data gathered during observation of product use. It seems reasonable to assume that overt behavior during use of toys would be influenced by a child's satisfaction with the toys. The lack of prior research in the marketing literature among very young subjects as well as the lack of literature on satisfaction with toys required the design of new measures. The developmental literature from cognitive psychology and early environmental stimulation were able to provide relevant direction.

Cognitive Development

A cognitive perspective to consumer socialization has been identified as especially appropriate (Ward, 1974). Age-related patterns in information-processing abilities can be observed and have been hypothesized as being linked to subsequent patterns of consumer behavior. In addition, a cognitive perspective recognizes the importance of the interaction between the individual and the environment.

During the first two years, or what Piaget termed "the sensori-motor period", toddler's interaction with the environment is based on direct forms of action within the realm of what would be considered play with toys or toy-like objects. One major form of interaction with the environment is that of manipulating objects such as toys. Piaget (1952) recognized that children derive satisfaction from their interactions with objects. This

satisfaction helps form an important basis for children's motivation to continue to grow in the development of cognitive skills. Although Piaget does not indicate how specific environmental conditions can influence variations in satisfaction, he does recognize that children vary in the complexity and richness of their cognitive behavior and that the quality of the environment is one source underlying this variation. The major contribution of Piaget's work, rather than focusing on environmental variables, has enhanced our understanding of how to distinguish differences in levels of cognitive performance.

Kagan's research (1971) on attention among infants, for example, utilized a cognitive framework to distinguish differences in children's "play tempo" during their manipulation of toys. Differences in play tempo could be distinguished as "reflective" or "impulsive" based upon the measure of the time spent with a toy and the number of acts performed. Impulsive children used fewer acts per time unit and spent less time in each toy contact. This impulsive pattern was found to be stable over time and was associated with weaker levels of cognitive functioning. The opposite pattern was evident among reflective children.

A second approach taken by cognitively oriented research has attended to study of the developmental progression of play. Fenson (1976), McCall (1974) and Sinclair (1970) are among the researchers who have identified a sequential development in the types of acts used by young children during their interactions with toys. Three major classes of behavior have been consistently identified:

1. the length of time of toy contacts
2. the number of acts performed during a toy contact
3. the type of act performed.

Longer periods of sustained contact with toys and greater numbers of acts have potential as behavioral measures of an increased sense of satisfaction. If a child were not satisfied with a toy, the contact should be brief and contain few exploratory acts. The types of behavior demonstrated should also vary, particularly as children's ages vary. Therefore, an older child should be satisfied by different types of toys than a younger child. This satisfaction will be reflected, not only in contact time and number of acts, but in the use of age-related types of acts. For example, an older child who has a stronger understanding of the organizational qualities of toys may gain more satisfaction from these types of toys because they can better use appropriate types of acts in exploring the toy category. This concept of a "match" between a child's level of developmental functioning and the characteristics of the environment was popularized by Hunt (1961). Some initial indications of the importance of the concept have been empirically confirmed by research in the area of environmental stimulation.

Environmental Stimulation

The importance of early cognitive growth and the impact of environmental qualities on this growth, has focused attention on environmental stimulation. The potential for environmental conditions to vary in their ability to stimulate cognitive activity, and thereby affect satisfaction, can be related to investigations of differing toy environments.

White and Held (1966) were early investigators of the potential for accelerating the onset of sensorimotor skills through an enriched toy environment. Subsequent studies by Kagan (1971), White (1973) and Wachs (1976) have indicated that variations in home environment stimulation levels could have significant long-term effects on cognitive achievement. Toys were found to be significant variables within the home environment.

Several environmental factors appear consistently enough to demonstrate their potential influence on satisfaction among young children. These toy conditions are:

1. the predictability (or degree of novelty) in the toy environment
2. the intensity of the stimulation as defined by such factors as the number of toys
3. the availability of types of toys which can be used in activities which relate to the child's present level of cognitive functioning
4. the variety of the toy environment and the adequacy of the auditory, visual, and tactile stimulation offered by toys.

There are, therefore, several potential variations in the toy environment to be further investigated, including the effects of the quantity and qualitative categories of toys.

Viewed together, the three areas of literature - satisfaction, cognitive development and environmental stimulation - suggest that there is considerable promise for research attending to the early measurement of satisfaction during play with toy products. Nevertheless, several problem areas must be considered.

PROBLEMS

Research among children under age three has not been extensive in the behavioral sciences, and in the area of consumer socialization and satisfaction, it has been almost nonexistent. Yet, important theoretical foundations are being established that require empirical justification. Nonetheless, prospective researchers in this area should be aware of some inherent problems in several areas:

1. selecting subjects
2. establishing experimental control on variables
3. determining observational measures

Subjects

Acquiring a group of very young subjects is difficult. There are few ready-made sources such as school systems from which a large number of subjects can be randomly selected. Day care centers for children under age two are still relatively few in number, and do not represent a random cross-section of children.

One alternative is selecting a clearly defined homogenous group. The factors on which homogeneity are based, however, tend to be external demographics such as parental educational background or income. Little, if any, thorough developmental assessment of children has occurred during the first year to equate children based on reliable developmental factors - such assessment is particularly unlikely in terms of cognitive development. As a result, subjects selected for study can represent a wide range of individual differences in developmental functioning, making it difficult to establish conclusions based solely on experimental variations.

The potential range of developmental differences also makes the selection of age groups difficult. Simple chronological age groupings seem to be the only feasible alternative due to the lack of good assessment measures (and the time to administer them). If a large enough sample of children can be acquired, the error of individual difference can be minimized. However, finding large groups of children within an age group range of one month (as was done in the reported study) puts severe constraints on the population from which a sample is drawn.

It should also be mentioned that very young children are not highly predictable subjects. Scheduling infants and toddlers for an experiment must remain highly flexible so the subject is in an active and alert state. Unfor-

unately, such a state is not easily predictable and simple events can quickly change a contented child into a frightened and crying one. Therefore, a familiar, non-threatening testing environment must be planned. Having a parent present during the testing in a passive role seems to work well toward maintaining a positive state among children.

Experimental Control

Establishing experimental control on toy variables also has its complications. Commercial toy products are far from unidimensional in their characteristics. Therefore, the experimenter must carefully weigh the toy factors under investigation and consider how these factors may be influenced by extraneous confounding variables such as novelty, complexity, size, color, sound potential, to name a few. In our study, for example, the definitional nature of the organizational toy category resulted in the presences of multiple parts to each toy, which could have created an in balance in favor of contact with the organizational toys.

An additional factor to consider seems to be the child's prior experience with selected toy environments. In the study of the effects of different quantity and qualitative categories, this seemed particularly important for the measurement of toy quantity effects. The inconsistent variation in children's responses to different experimental toy quantity conditions due to age and sex factors suggested that children may have become accustomed to a quantity level usually present in their home environment. Historical data from home observation or longitudinal study combined with direct experimental control might be considered in future work. Cross-cultural comparisons may also be useful in this respect.

The length of time of the experiment also requires consideration. A uniform time of ten-minutes was satisfactory based on the satisfaction indices of time per contact and acts per contact. However, informal observation of differences in children's behavior during the first five minutes as compared to the last five minutes lead us to conclude that the addition of a time unit to our measures (i.e., acts per contact per minute) would have enabled better comparison of behavior. In addition, a measure which included a per time unit would have permitted the testing of different toy quantity levels to vary in proportion to the toy numbers. For example, this could have given children proportionally more time to explore the toys at 21 toy level.

Observation Measures

Designing a system for observing phenomenon such as satisfaction during play presents a unique set of problems. Although we established measures of satisfaction that appear to be well founded in theory, additional research should be undertaken to test the validity of the proposed measures.

Assuming the selected measures are valid, observing and recording them accurately becomes a problem. Behavioral measures of play are subject to subtle variations which may be hard to detect. The differences, however, may influence interrater reliability. Therefore, care must be exercised in precisely defining dependent measures and basing these definitions on objective behavioral cues. Careful training of observers must occur with continual retraining to check for significant fluctuations in each rater's coding patterns.

CONCLUSION

A recent study (Bjorklund, 1978) of children's satisfaction within differing toy quantity-qualitative category environments, used cognitive measures of

play behavior to differentiate satisfaction levels. The rationale for the study was based on literature from several disciplines: the literature of consumer socialization, which emphasizes the developmental differences in behavior and the importance of early experiences toward later consumer behavior; the satisfaction literature, which pointed toward the need for behavioral indicators of satisfaction; developmental literature, which lead to the selection of indices of satisfaction and significant environmental alternatives within the toy environment. This literature, combined with the results of the experiment have suggested that while there is considerable prospective for future investigation in the area of early consumer behavior, significant problems must be recognized before pursuing future research.

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